

Rising Women Rising World: A Force for Change by Dr. Hamira Riaz

When Scilla Elworthy, Jean Houston and Rama Mani first met in 2012 there was a perfect synchronicity of temperaments and ideas. Clinical psychologist and business consultant, Dr Hamira Riaz, talks to the three founders of Rising Women Rising World about the goals of this global community of remarkable women and the art of a life well lived.

It is an unusual occurrence when the roll call of achievements of just three women includes several nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize; training roles for UN Development Programmes, and advice-giving to NATO military officers and government officials. That the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela and the Clintons, to name just a few, have sought them out for their input makes the individuals of this triumvirate more interesting still. A cursory trawl of their backgrounds adds billionaires such as Richard Branson; philosophers including Buckminster Fuller; and even a Beatle, John Lennon, to their list of admirers.

Their collaboration, Rising Women Rising World (RWRW), is less than two years old but it is already a global movement that punches well above its weight on the world stage. It began with them gathering together 20 women with backgrounds representing all geographies and cultures, whose individual contributions were deep subject matter expertise covering issues as diverse as Currency and Provision (economy) to 'Seven Generations' (indigenous wisdom) and Politeia (governance). What distinguishes them, however, is their collective belief system; it is centred on harnessing the power of deep feminine principles by including, rather than alienating, men.

The mission statement and values of RWRW speak of a move toward "wholeness" – something that they want to achieve through integrative thinking. This approach seeks to find ways of joining up the dots between different perspectives.

It is acknowledged that the task ahead is likely to be a long and arduous one, after all, the goal is nothing short of the emergence of a radically new world view, one that is founded on compassion and informed intelligence. The fuel for the journey is the intrinsic longing of men and women to protect and heal. Essentially, RWRW is founded on the principle that by bringing the feminine into balance with the masculine, their ultimate 'aim' will be realised – an elevation of human consciousness itself.

The beating heart of RWRW is a committed group of specialists. These 'pioneers' form the nuclei of 12 fields of work or 'constellations'. Their role is to identify and nurture the development of an additional 12 like-minded but less experienced women, who can take what they learn back into the world and help develop another constellation of 12 women in turn. At its most basic this is a pyramid mentoring scheme but what sets it apart is the inspiring vision and almost mystical set of values. Essentially, it requires participants to

tap into their 'higher selves'.

Which begs the question, how did the three founder members of this movement discover and develop the best version of themselves? After all, we all have a dark side, don't we? The publication of 'Why CEOs Fail' by David Dotlich and Peter Cairo in 2003 is one of many books based on the idea that whilst we become successful by virtue of our strengths, we can also be "derailed by a host of "self-sabotaging behaviours. The Hogan Development Survey is perhaps the best-known test that purports to measure aspects of our 'bright' vs. 'dark' sides. With labels such as mischievous, excitable, sceptical and leisurely, these behaviours are said to most likely occur during periods of emotional stress, prolonged fatigue, periods following ill health and intense time pressure.

I am not sure how useful personality tests are when it comes to deconstructing the psyche of very experienced people. In my view, most successful individuals show greater self-awareness as they get older, enough to make questionnaires rather redundant when it comes to picking up on their shadowy side. So when I spoke to the RWRW founders, the idea that they had somehow managed to discover how to consistently 'be their best self', was uppermost in my mind. But I have been a practising psychologist for more than 25 years and during that time, I have never met anyone who has an accurate read on their unique strengths without displaying an equally sophisticated sense of their blind spots.

So, whilst I was expecting all three women to be riveting interviewees and was looking forward to meaningful conversations peppered with pearls of wisdom, I also wanted to assure myself that I discovered enough about their dark sides to understand how their light side came into being. And finally, if I am being completely honest, the defensive pessimist in me was slightly concerned that there wouldn't be any real surprises and I would find myself on the receiving end of well-rehearsed commentary. I needn't have worried. What followed was a series of wonderful interactions with three seriously smart women of the world, full of humour and humility as well as a healthy dose of irreverence, all wrapped up in an incandescent drive to make a real difference - starting with Scilla Elworthy.

Born in Galashiels, Scotland and viewed by her four elder brothers as uppity and noisy, she felt a strong call to action in her early teens. She recalls the effect the Hungarian uprising of 1956 had on her: "I was sitting watching a black and white TV as the soviet tanks rolled into Budapest and all these students, kids really, were throwing themselves in front of them. I packed my suitcase then and there and told my mother I was going to Budapest." Her mother dissuaded her from taking off but sensibly took Scilla seriously. She was encouraged to equip herself with the skills and experience needed to make a valuable contribution. She spent her summers visiting Nazi concentration camps and working with refugee groups in France and Algiers, eventually moving to Ireland to study social sciences at Trinity College, Dublin.

By 1970, she was chairing Kupugani, a South African nutrition education organisation and putting novel self-financing initiatives into place, such as the sale of nutritious Christmas hampers to industrial employees. Passionate about the rights of minority groups, she also helped organise the launch of the Market Theatre, South Africa's first multiracial theatre.

The unlikely pairing of Angelina Jolie and William Hague in the fight against violence towards women has been causing a stir but it is a sobering thought that it is more than 35 years since Scilla delivered a report on female genital mutilation, leading to the World Health Organisation campaign to eradicate the practice. She subsequently became a consultant on women's issues to UNESCO and wrote UNESCO's contribution to the 1980

United Nations Mid-decade Conference on Women: 'The role of women in peace research, peace education and the improvement of relations between nations'. This period reflected a shift in mindset for Scilla.

"From a young age, I felt I had little choice. I was hooked by the suffering of people as a result of war and motivated to alleviate it but then I switched and started to work with folk who had the power to make war and peace because I realised that if I could get on with them on a personal basis, there was a chance I could help prevent the catastrophe of conflict."

And it was this gift for building trusting relationships that led to the success of the Oxford Research Group (ORG) that she founded in 1982. Set up as an NGO that independently researched decision-making on security in the five major nuclear nations during and after the Cold War, Scilla remembers, "I was really interested in people who made decisions about nuclear weapons. I put together cognitive maps of how they thought." For her work in bringing together policy makers, academics, the military and civil society to engage in dialogue with their critics, she was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize and eventually awarded the Niwano Peace Prize in 2003. Having now stepped down as executive director of ORG, she went on to found Peace Direct and remains an ambassador of the charity to this day. As well as founding RWRW in 2013, Scilla is a Councillor on the World Future Council and a trusted advisor to leaders of international corporations on the new values required in the 21st century.

What becomes clear from talking to Scilla Elworthy is that having spent decades being the only woman in a room full of quite openly bigoted military men, she has become skilled at reaching the softer male side, something she feels is related to being unimpressed by how people present on the surface. By doing so she has realised that, regardless of how confident they may seem, even the most successful CEOs have a fear of being found out. Equally, she is open about her fears: "I always had the courage to put my head above the parapet. I was sometimes scared to do it but I did it anyway because unless we walk towards what we are afraid of, it bites us again and again until we learn we can't ignore it anymore." She is a big fan of listening to the persistent self-critical voices we all carry around in our heads, "especially if they wake you up in the middle of the night. Then I sit down and talk to them. I have sometimes been shocked rigid by the perceptiveness and truth of my critical voices, they've been very helpful."

Scilla's co-founder of RWRW, Rama Mani, is no stranger to epiphanies either. Despite being an internationally-reputed scholar and a practitioner of peace and security, Rama's personal impact in my second interview was more 'earth goddess' than 'detached academic'. A French national, Rama was brought up in India. She remembers her father insisting that she be strong and independent. This began a journey of what she describes as 'masculinisation' whereby she spent many years wearing the mask of male leadership to achieve her aims.

Like Scilla, Rama has forged a career at the head of local and international organisations, addressing conflict and injustice. She too has spent lots of time face-to-face with the male patriarchy, with both senior military officers at the NATO Defense College and senior government officials at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. She has convened innovative initiatives for change and supported grassroots movements for peace, justice and healing in Asia and Africa. She has worked as Senior External Relations Officer to the Commission on Global Governance based in Geneva as well as having several roles with Oxfam, including Strategy Manager in the UK and Regional Policy Coordinator in Ethiopia. In 2013 she was awarded the Peter-Becker-Prize for Peace and Conflict Research by

Philipps-University Marburg for the impact of her peace activism and studies.

Looking back at her early career, Rama acknowledges that she was largely closed to introspection, seeing it as a form of self-indulgence. That was until in 1999, whilst finishing her PhD in Political Science at the University of Cambridge, she felt overwhelmed by a persistent listlessness: "There was nothing wrong with me but I felt really ill for about a week. While I was in bed, I read 'The Sacred Path of the Warrior', a Buddhist text that I normally wouldn't have looked at. The sacred warrior becomes tender which gives him the strength to do what needs to be done in the world. I wept and wept. I realised I was discovering who I really was." One year later, during a tough mission in Somaliland, Rama had a second major realisation about the role of art, culture, nature and spirituality in transforming conflict and that has been the fulcrum of her work ever since.

As a performance artist, Rama Mani is now fully able to channel her passion for the power of the imagination because, "art can do what statistics cannot do – namely speak soul to soul." In her electrifying public appearances, she weaves poetry and artistry with witness testimonials so that audiences, however cerebral, find themselves responding emotionally. Her theatre is transformative and has possibly played a role in changing her from someone who didn't want to be associated with the weaknesses of exploitable women into someone who is much more comfortable with her femininity.

Rama seems all softness and light to me so it is hard to believe that from time to time, her dark side can still rear up. She sums it up as "too muchness... something left over from my masculine side." Many strong-minded, smart women will empathise with Rama when she says that she can come across, unintentionally, as a little pushy. She firmly believes that ego and intellect can stop the super-collective intelligence from manifesting itself but because she is also someone who can see the big picture and is constantly impatient with the pace of change, she can move forward too fast, thus potentially, "spoiling the broth because others need time or are simply not ready yet."

Like many seekers, Rama speaks of herself as a work in progress. Having lived, worked and learned about life's terrors and triumphs in India, the US, France, Algeria, Italy, Switzerland, the UK, Ethiopia, Uganda, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, she is committed to co-creating a world for all, "not just about humans, not just male vs. female but as much about nature, culture and spirituality." In that, she has much in common with her friend and the third co-founder of RWRW, Jean Houston.

It's not easy to deal dispassionately with a woman whose, "mind should be considered a national treasure," according to Buckminster Fuller and whose forebears have a city named after them – yes indeed, Houston in Texas. So just as with Scilla and Rama, I decided not to read too much about Jean before we spoke and I am so glad I didn't. Our conversation hurtled joyously from knee damage sustained from a fall into a lava crater, to a lifelong love of dogs and being, "raised by fur", to learning lessons about the dangers of passive female stereotypes after watching the Ramayana on the only TV in an Indian village courtesy of a little old Brahmin lady, to how the modern-day popularity of tattoos may just be an external, unconscious expression of growing mass mindfulness. Jean Houston, I discovered, is a master of magical storytelling.

Born prematurely to a Sicilian mother and Texan father, Jean Houston refers to herself as the world's largest, oldest foetus whose unique perspective on life has been formed by coming into the world 'incomplete'.

She sees this as the source of her strength as it comes with handy perks in that she can

tune into unfamiliar cultures and pick up new languages very easily. But it also has a dark side because it renders her chronically over-available. It is not unusual for this 77-year-old lady to work 18-hour days to answer the 1000+ emails she receives every day.

By the time she was a teenager, Jean had attended more than 20 schools. Being the perpetual 'new girl', she felt she had no choice but to take control somehow. So she made a habit of becoming class president by being generous with her bubble-gum and showing off her talent with a lasso. Brought up to be of service to others, it was during this time that she became aware of how many young children were falling away because of the inadequacies of the education system.

In a curious twist of fate, she literally bumped into Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ on the way to school through Central Park aged 13. She remembers the next three years of walking in the park with the French philosopher and Jesuit priest, with fondness. It's no surprise that the man who trained as a paleontologist and geologist before taking part in the discovery of Peking, made a mind-expanding thought partner for young Jean. She was lucky in her mentors in those years as she also worked closely with former First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt in developing strategies to introduce international awareness and UN work to young people. By the time she left high school, Jean had well and truly heard 'the call'.

She was also fortunate in her choice of spouse. She married Robert Masters in 1968. His student activities in Paris had him informally studying with Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Jean and Bob were well matched and founded The Foundation for Mind Research into which they poured their shared passion for unlocking human potential. Of their many co-authored books, 'Mind Games: The Guide to Inner Space', inspired John Lennon to finish the song he had originally entitled 'Make Love, Not War'. In 1983, Jean founded the Mystery School, which orchestrates programs of cross-cultural, mythic and spiritual studies, dedicated to teaching history, philosophy, the New Physics, psychology, anthropology, and the many dimensions of human potential. She then started a national NGO known as The Possible Society and more recently co-founded the International Institute for Social Artistry. She has continued in her role as human and cultural advisor to UNICEF, which in 1999 took her to Dharamsala, India, to work with the Dalai Lama.

So, how do I sum up my encounter with these incredible women? I liked Jean's phrase when describing her distinctive strength as 'galloping hutzpah'. To my mind, it applies just as well to Scilla and Rama. On a planet where 36 million people live as slaves, where 42 million have been forcibly displaced, where 774 million are illiterate, where one in three women can expect to be beaten or raped, where less than a fifth of the world's military expenditure could lift all the planet's inhabitants above the poverty line of US\$1 a day, there is no doubt we need women to take their place at the table and change the story. We need movements like RWRW and we need women like Jean, Scilla and Rama to set the bar unbelievably high. With everything they have seen and the amazing things they have done with their lives, they remain the bold, broad-minded, brave believers in a better world they have always been. So perhaps more than anything else, we need a great many more men and women to follow their lead.